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Governor Gregoire authorizes statewide drought emergency

YAKIMA – Gov. Christine Gregoire today authorized the Department of Ecology (Ecology) to declare a statewide drought emergency, based on the extremely low snow pack in the mountains and record-low flows that are being seen in many rivers across the state.

“While water shortages won’t affect all areas of the state in precisely the same way, it seems very likely that all areas of our state will experience at least some level of drought this year,” Gregoire said. “We need to start taking action now, and all of us need to be part of the solution.”

Across the state, precipitation is at or near record lows, and the mountain snow pack averages about 26 percent of normal. Many rivers and creeks on both sides of the Cascades are flowing at or near record-low levels for this time of year.

Gregoire noted that irrigators in the Yakima basin are feeling the greatest pinch at the moment, but even Western Washington water utilities that have large reservoirs are starting to dust off their drought response plans, and the outlook for fish-bearing streams throughout Washington is poor.

“Some communities have invested in systems to reuse and conserve water, and they’ll survive this drought better than communities that haven’t done as much,” Gregoire said. “Throughout this spring and summer, citizens need to pay close attention to what their local water providers are saying about water supplies in their area, and follow the instructions they are given.

“For most areas, every drop of water we save now is water that will be available later when we may really need it.”

The emergency declaration immediately activates several tools the Department of Ecology can use to ease the effects of the drought: emergency water permits, temporary transfers of water rights and funding from the state’s Drought Emergency Account.

Ecology Director Jay Manning said his department will focus on helping farmers, communities and streams get the water they need.

“Unfortunately, I cannot promise that everyone will get all the water they want,” Manning said. “In some cases, we will be able to provide only enough water for people to get by. We will manage available water supplies the best we can, but we can’t replace what nature doesn’t give us.”

Gregoire has called on her Emergency Drought Committee to function like an emergency command center, tracking and coordinating response efforts by state agencies and making sure resources are getting to where they are needed.

The departments of Agriculture, Health, and Fish and Wildlife will work closely with Ecology to help identify where actions or investments need to be made to address water shortages. Also, the Washington Conservation Commission will work with local conservation districts and individual farmers to conserve and deliver irrigation water more efficiently.

Other state agencies with a role in drought response include the Employment Security Department, which will respond with necessary unemployment services, and the departments of Natural Resources and Emergency Management, which will coordinate fire-fighting efforts in forests.

Gregoire also has asked the National Guard to be prepared to support fire-fighting efforts, and she plans to ask the legislature to approve another \$8.2 million in funding to support the drought response this year.

Manning said the state is in a better position to respond to drought this year because of lessons learned during the 2001 statewide drought emergency and investments that have been made to prepare communities, farmers and state hatcheries for future droughts.

For example, some communities are using treated waste water to irrigate landscaping, wash construction equipment and replenish wetlands. And on many farms, open ditches have been replaced with pipes to reduce evaporation, and wasteful irrigation systems have been replaced with equipment that uses less water.

“There are a lot of ways people can reduce their water use to protect our streams and to keep the farms and businesses that power our state’s economic engine running,” Gregoire said. “We can manage this challenge if we all contribute to the solution.”

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Drought Web site: www.ecy.wa.gov, click on Drought
Governor’s Web site: www.governor.wa.gov